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A normative framework for ethical brand identity construction

Ania A Drzewiecka *

School of Textiles and Design, Heriot-Watt University, Scotland, UK.

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Abstract

This paper develops a normative framework for ethical brand identity construction, arguing that branding is not merely a strategic or aesthetic exercise but a fundamentally moral practice. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises that brand identity shapes organisational meaning, influences stakeholder behaviour, and participates in broader cultural narratives. Drawing on ethical theory, aesthetic analysis, and organisational communication, the paper demonstrates how aesthetic choices—imagery, symbolism, narrative tone, and design—encode values and exert persuasive power that affects trust, autonomy, and social representation. Building on this insight, the paper introduces a seven-dimension framework encompassing truthfulness, respect, autonomy, justice, care, stewardship, and aesthetic responsibility. This model provides a structured method for evaluating how brand identities align with or diverge from moral expectations.

The paper shows that ethical tensions often arise when aesthetic coherence is mistaken for ethical coherence, revealing how visually compelling identities can obscure gaps in transparency, inclusivity, or responsible practice. The framework exposes these contradictions and highlights the ethical significance of representation, accessibility, and the psychological impact of aesthetic communication—areas frequently overlooked in traditional branding analysis. The study contributes to branding scholarship by integrating ethics and aesthetics into a unified evaluative model and by advancing the concept of aesthetic responsibility as central to organisational character. While interpretive limitations remain, the framework offers a foundation for future empirical research and provides organisations with a practical tool for constructing brand identities that are both aesthetically compelling and ethically grounded.

Keywords: Ethical Brand Identity; Brand; Normative Framework; Ethics; Aesthetics

1. Introduction: Why brand identity is an ethical practice

Brand identity is increasingly recognised as an ethical practice because it shapes how organisations communicate values, construct meaning, and influence stakeholder behaviour. Branding is not a neutral activity: it involves deliberate choices about representation, persuasion, and organisational truthfulness. Scholarly debates involve brand identity participation in the moral economy of organisations by shaping perceptions of trust, authenticity, and legitimacy (Holt 2002; Kapferer 2012). Ethical branding research further shows that the values embedded in identity construction directly affect organisational reputation and stakeholder loyalty (Syed Alwi, Ali & Nguyen 2017).

The ethical dimension becomes even more pronounced when considering the persuasive power of aesthetic communication. Aesthetic elements—such as imagery, symbolism, typography, and narrative tone—do not merely reflect organisational values; they actively shape them. Semprini (2005) argues that a brand's identity is "the sum of all discourses about it," implying that every aesthetic choice contributes to a broader moral narrative. Aesthetic strategies can reinforce or challenge social norms, influence emotional responses, and shape consumer autonomy, making them ethically consequential (Schroeder 2006).

* Corresponding author: Ania A Drzewiecka

Contemporary branding also operates within a cultural environment where issues of representation, inclusivity, and authenticity are subject to public scrutiny. Leon and Skorin-Kapov (2023) highlight that aesthetics and ethics jointly shape leadership, branding, and organisational morale, suggesting that aesthetic decisions are inseparable from ethical ones. Similarly, Bandyopadhyay and Ray (2020) show that ethical and aesthetic considerations intersect in sustainable fashion branding, where identity construction must balance visual appeal with moral responsibility. Understanding brand identity as an ethical practice therefore requires examining how aesthetic decisions encode values, how narratives align with organisational behaviour, and how identity construction affects diverse stakeholders.

2. Theoretical foundations: ethics + aesthetics

2.1. Ethics as a foundation for brand identity

Ethical theory provides a robust foundation for analysing brand identity because branding practices involve choices that affect autonomy, dignity, and justice. Ethics or moral philosophy refers to several branches on the right and wrong behaviour (Fieser 2018). Meta-ethics studies moral concepts, normative ethics focuses on common principles, whereas applied ethics also known as professional ethics considers ethical principles in action (Fieser 2018). Deontological perspectives emphasise duties of honesty and non-deception, which are central to avoiding misleading identity claims or aestheticised distortions of organisational reality (Frederick, 1999). Consequentialist approaches highlight the outcomes of branding practices, such as their effects on consumer well-being, trust, and social cohesion. Empirical research shows that ethical values embedded in brand identity influence organisational reputation and stakeholder loyalty (Syed Alwi et al. 2017).

Virtue ethics and care ethics further enrich this foundation by focusing on the character a brand expresses and the quality of its relationships with stakeholders. These perspectives conceptualise brand identity not only as a communication tool but as a moral expression of organisational character (Fisher & Lovell 2009). They foreground relational responsibilities toward communities, cultures, and environments, making them particularly relevant in contexts such as sustainability, heritage branding, and cultural representation.

2.2. Aesthetics as a moral force in branding

Aesthetics is not merely decorative in branding; it is a mode of meaning-making that carries ethical weight. Semprini's (2005) work on brand aesthetics demonstrates that aesthetic choices shape the interpretive frameworks through which audiences understand a brand. Because aesthetic forms influence perception and emotion, they can support or undermine ethical aims. Schroeder (2006) argues that visual branding constructs social meaning and participates in cultural discourse, making aesthetic decisions ethically charged.

Recent scholarship emphasises that aesthetic decisions in business contexts influence moral judgement and organisational culture. Leon and Skorin-Kapov (2023) show that aesthetics and ethics jointly shape leadership and organisational morale, while Bandyopadhyay and Ray (2020) demonstrate how aesthetic strategies in sustainable fashion branding must align with ethical commitments to avoid superficial or misleading identity claims. These insights align with broader interdisciplinary work showing that aesthetic practices can normalise certain values, construct social identities, and shape emotional responses (Venkatesh & Meamber 2008).

2.3. Integrating ethics and aesthetics

Bringing ethics and aesthetics together provides a comprehensive theoretical foundation for evaluating brand identity. Ethics clarifies what brands ought to do, while aesthetics explains how brand identity communicates, persuades, and shapes meaning. Together, they reveal that brand identity construction is a normative practice involving moral choices about representation and truthfulness, aesthetic strategies that influence perception and behaviour, social responsibilities toward diverse stakeholders, and alignment between organisational values and communicative forms.

This integrated foundation supports the development of a normative framework capable of evaluating brand identity not only as a strategic artefact but as an ethical and aesthetic practice with real social consequences.

3. Defining Ethical Brand Identity Construction

Ethical brand identity construction refers to the process through which organisations develop visual, verbal, and symbolic representations of themselves in ways that align with moral principles and social responsibilities. It recognises that brand identity is not simply a strategic communication tool but a normative practice that shapes how organisations

present their values, engage with stakeholders, and participate in cultural meaning-making (Holt 2002; Kapferer 2012). This perspective positions brand identity as a site where ethical and aesthetic considerations intersect, requiring organisations to reflect on how their identity practices influence autonomy, dignity, justice, and well-being.

At its core, ethical brand identity construction involves ensuring coherence between what a brand *claims* and what it *does*. Scholars argue that authenticity and transparency are central to ethical branding because misalignment between identity and practice undermines trust and can constitute a form of organisational deception (Frederick, 1999; Syed Alwi, Ali & Nguyen 2017). Ethical identity construction therefore requires brands to avoid aestheticised distortions—such as greenwashing, heritage-washing, or purpose-washing—that use visual or narrative cues to imply values not supported by organisational behaviour (Schroeder 2006).

Ethical brand identity construction also requires attention to representation. Visual and narrative choices shape how individuals and groups are portrayed, which can reinforce or challenge stereotypes, social hierarchies, and cultural norms (Schroeder 2006; Venkatesh & Meamber 2008). This makes representation an ethical concern, particularly in contexts involving gender, race, body image, or cultural heritage. As Bandyopadhyay and Ray (2020) show in sustainable fashion branding, aesthetic strategies can either support or undermine ethical commitments depending on how they frame cultural symbols, environmental claims, and social narratives.

A further dimension of ethical identity construction concerns the influence of aesthetic forms on consumer autonomy. Aesthetic strategies can evoke emotional responses, shape preferences, and guide behaviour, raising ethical questions about manipulation, persuasion, and cognitive vulnerability (Frederick 1999). Ethical identity construction therefore requires brands to consider how their aesthetic choices affect consumer decision-making, digital well-being, and psychological states.

Finally, ethical brand identity construction is relational. It involves ongoing responsibilities to communities, cultures, and environments. Virtue-based and care-based perspectives emphasise that brands express organisational character through their identity practices and must therefore cultivate qualities such as honesty, respect, and care (Fisher & Lovell 2009). Leon and Skorin-Kapov (2023) further argue that aesthetic and ethical commitments jointly shape organisational morale and stakeholder relationships, reinforcing the idea that identity construction is a moral practice embedded in social contexts.

Taken together, these insights suggest that ethical brand identity construction is a multidimensional process involving truthfulness, representation, influence, inclusion, care, stewardship, and aesthetic responsibility. This conceptualisation provides the foundation for developing a normative framework capable of evaluating brand identity not only as a strategic artefact but as a practice with significant ethical and aesthetic implications.

4. The Seven Dimensions of Ethical Brand Identity Construction

Ethical brand identity construction can be operationalised through seven interrelated dimensions that capture the moral, cultural, and aesthetic responsibilities embedded in branding practice. These dimensions synthesise insights from marketing ethics, visual culture studies, organisational ethics, and aesthetic theory, providing a structured way to evaluate how brands communicate values and influence stakeholders (Frederick, 1999; Schroeder 2006; Venkatesh & Meamber 2008). Each dimension reflects a distinct ethical concern while collectively forming a holistic framework for assessing the normative quality of brand identity.

4.1. Truthfulness and transparency

Truthfulness is foundational to ethical branding because brand identity functions as a public representation of organisational values and practices. Misalignment between identity and behaviour—such as greenwashing, heritage-washing, or purpose-washing—constitutes a form of organisational deception that undermines trust (Frederick, 1999). Transparency requires brands to communicate claims accurately, acknowledge limitations, and avoid aesthetic strategies that obscure ethically relevant information. Research shows that truthful identity construction strengthens reputation and stakeholder loyalty (Syed Alwi, Ali & Nguyen 2017), making transparency both an ethical and strategic imperative.

4.2. Respect for persons and groups

Brand identity participates in shaping cultural meaning and social representation. Visual and narrative choices can reinforce or challenge stereotypes, influence perceptions of dignity, and affect how individuals and groups are valued in society (Schroeder 2006). Ethical identity construction therefore requires brands to avoid reductive portrayals,

objectification, or exploitative uses of identity markers such as gender, race, or body image. This dimension aligns with broader ethical concerns about representation, cultural sensitivity, and the moral responsibilities of organisations in public discourse (Venkatesh & Meamber 2008).

4.3. Autonomy and influence

Brand identity exerts persuasive power through aesthetic and emotional cues. While persuasion is inherent to branding, ethical concerns arise when aesthetic strategies manipulate cognitive biases, exploit vulnerabilities, or undermine reflective decision-making (Frederick 1999). This dimension evaluates whether brands use design responsibly, avoid dark patterns, and support consumer autonomy. It also considers the impact of digital identity environments on attention, cognitive load, and well-being, reflecting growing concerns about the ethics of digital persuasion.

4.4. Justice and inclusion

Brand identity contributes to the construction of social imaginaries and can either reinforce or challenge inequities. Inclusive identity practices ensure that diverse groups are represented meaningfully and respectfully, while exclusionary aesthetics can marginalise or erase certain identities (Schroeder 2006). Ethical identity construction therefore requires attention to accessibility, fairness, and the distribution of representational space. This dimension aligns with contemporary debates on diversity, equity, and inclusion in organisational communication and cultural production.

4.5. Care and well-being

Brands influence emotional and psychological states through their aesthetic and narrative strategies. Ethical identity construction requires brands to consider how their identity affects consumer well-being, employee morale, and community life (Leon & Skorin-Kapov 2023). This includes avoiding imagery that induces anxiety, unrealistic expectations, or harmful comparison, as well as fostering positive emotional environments. Care ethics emphasises relational responsibility, making this dimension central to understanding how brands support or undermine stakeholder well-being (Fisher & Lovell 2009).

4.6. Environmental and cultural stewardship

Brand identity often draws on environmental imagery, cultural symbols, and heritage narratives. Ethical stewardship requires brands to use these elements responsibly, avoiding appropriation, superficial sustainability claims, or extractive storytelling (Bandyopadhyay & Ray 2020). This dimension evaluates whether brands honour cultural origins, communicate environmental commitments honestly, and contribute to long-term ecological and cultural well-being. It reflects the growing expectation that brands act as stewards rather than exploiters of cultural and natural resources.

4.7. Aesthetic responsibility

Aesthetic responsibility recognises that aesthetic choices are not morally neutral. Visual and sensory forms shape perception, emotion, and meaning, influencing how stakeholders interpret organisational values (Semprini 2005). Ethical identity construction therefore requires brands to reflect on the psychological and cultural effects of their aesthetic strategies, ensuring coherence between aesthetic style and ethical commitments. This dimension integrates insights from aesthetics and business ethics, highlighting how aesthetic practices contribute to organisational character and stakeholder relationships (Leon & Skorin-Kapov 2023).

Together, these seven dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for evaluating ethical brand identity construction. They capture the multifaceted ways in which branding practices influence stakeholders, shape cultural meaning, and express organisational values, offering a robust foundation for both scholarly analysis and practical assessment.

5. Criteria and Indicators for Evaluating Ethical Brand Identity Construction

The seven dimensions outlined above can be operationalised through a set of criteria and indicators that enable systematic evaluation of ethical brand identity construction. Developing clear evaluative criteria is essential for translating normative principles into assessable practices, allowing researchers and practitioners to identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas of ethical risk (Frederick, 1999; Fisher & Lovell 2009). These criteria also support comparative analysis across brands and industries, providing a structured basis for empirical inquiry.

Each dimension is associated with specific criteria that capture its ethical focus. For example, the dimension of *truthfulness and transparency* can be assessed through indicators such as the accuracy of claims, the alignment between identity and organisational behaviour, and the avoidance of aesthetic obfuscation. These indicators reflect concerns about deception and authenticity that are central to ethical branding (Syed Alwi, Ali & Nguyen 2017). Similarly, *respect for persons and groups* dimension can be evaluated through indicators related to representation, avoidance of stereotyping, and sensitivity to cultural and social contexts, drawing on research that highlights the ethical implications of visual and narrative portrayals (Schroeder 2006; Venkatesh & Meamber 2008).

The dimension of *autonomy and influence* requires indicators that assess whether aesthetic strategies support reflective decision-making or exploit cognitive vulnerabilities. This includes evaluating the use of emotional triggers, the presence of manipulative design patterns, and the impact of digital environments on attention and well-being (Frederick 1999). *Justice and inclusion* can be operationalised through indicators related to accessibility, diversity of representation, and the fairness of narrative positioning, reflecting broader concerns about equity in organisational communication.

Indicators for *care and well-being* focus on the psychological and emotional effects of brand identity, including whether aesthetic strategies promote unrealistic expectations, induce anxiety, or support positive stakeholder experiences (Leon & Skorin-Kapov 2023). *Environmental and cultural stewardship* can be assessed through indicators related to the authenticity of cultural references, the honesty of sustainability claims, and the degree to which brands act as responsible stewards rather than extractive users of cultural and natural resources (Bandyopadhyay & Ray 2020). Finally, *aesthetic responsibility* requires indicators that evaluate the psychological effects of aesthetic forms, the coherence between aesthetic style and ethical commitments, and the broader cultural implications of aesthetic choices (Semprini 2005).

Table 1 Brings the discussed dimensions and criteria together while proposing some sample questions to be asked to direct the ethical focus of brand assessment.

Dimension	Key criteria	Sample question	Ethical focus
<i>Truthfulness</i>	Alignment, accuracy	Does identity match reality?	Duty not to deceive
<i>Respect</i>	Representation, dignity	Are groups/individuals portrayed respectfully?	Respect for persons
<i>Autonomy</i>	Influence, clarity	Does design manipulate?	Autonomy
<i>Justice</i>	Inclusion, accessibility	Who is excluded?	Fairness
<i>Care</i>	Well-being, community	Does identity harm or support well-being?	Care ethics
<i>Stewardship</i>	Culture, environment	Is heritage used responsibly?	Responsibility
<i>Aesthetic responsibility</i>	Psychological impact	What does the aesthetic do?	Moral agency of aesthetic

Together, these criteria and indicators form a comprehensive evaluative tool that enables systematic assessment of ethical brand identity construction (Table 1). They provide the foundation for empirical application and support the development of a normative framework that is both theoretically grounded and practically actionable.

6. Methodological Approach for Applying the Framework

The methodological approach for applying this framework combines conceptual analysis with empirical evaluation, enabling a rigorous assessment of ethical brand identity construction. A multi-phase design is appropriate, allowing for iterative refinement and validation of the criteria and indicators (Fisher & Lovell 2009). This approach ensures that the framework is both theoretically robust and sensitive to the complexities of branding practice.

The first phase involves conceptual development, drawing on existing literature in marketing ethics, aesthetics, organisational communication, and cultural studies. This phase establishes the theoretical foundations of the

framework and identifies the initial set of dimensions and indicators. It also clarifies the normative assumptions underlying the framework, ensuring coherence with established ethical theories (Frederick 1999).

The second phase consists of expert validation, using methods such as interviews, focus groups, or Delphi studies with brand strategists, designers, ethicists, and consumer researchers. This phase ensures that the framework reflects the realities of branding practice and incorporates practitioner insights into ethical challenges and aesthetic decision-making. Expert validation also helps refine the indicators, identify gaps, and enhance the framework's practical relevance.

The third phase involves empirical application through case studies. Applying the framework to a diverse set of brands—such as sustainable fashion labels, technology companies, heritage brands, or digital-first organisations—allows for comparative analysis and demonstrates the framework's analytical power. Case studies can reveal tensions between aesthetic strategies and ethical commitments, highlight best practices, and identify recurring patterns of ethical risk (Schroeder 2006; Bandyopadhyay & Ray 2020).

The final phase focuses on evaluation and refinement, using insights from empirical application to adjust the framework. This may involve revising indicators, clarifying definitions, or incorporating new dimensions that emerge from practice. The iterative nature of this process ensures that the framework remains responsive to evolving branding practices and ethical expectations.

This methodological approach supports both academic and practical objectives. It provides a rigorous basis for scholarly analysis while also producing a tool that can be used by organisations to assess and improve their brand identity practices. By integrating conceptual clarity, empirical grounding, and practitioner insight, the methodology ensures that the framework is both theoretically sound and practically impactful.

7. Case Study Application: Demonstrating the Framework in Practice

Applying the ethical brand identity framework to real-world cases provides an opportunity to evaluate its analytical power and to illustrate how the seven dimensions operate in practice. Case studies are widely used in branding and business ethics research because they allow for in-depth examination of communicative practices, organisational behaviour, and cultural meaning-making within specific contexts (Holt 2002; Schroeder 2006). This section presents two illustrative anonymous case studies — one from sustainable fashion and one from digital technology — to demonstrate how the framework can be used to assess ethical brand identity construction.

7.1. Case Study 1: A Sustainable Fashion Brand

Sustainable fashion brands often position themselves as ethically responsible, making them a productive context for evaluating the alignment between identity and practice. For this case, the framework is applied to a hypothetical but representative sustainable fashion brand that emphasises environmental stewardship, artisanal heritage, and minimalist aesthetics.

7.1.1. Truthfulness and transparency

The brand communicates strong sustainability claims through natural imagery, earthy colour palettes, and narratives of circular production. However, closer examination can reveal limited disclosure about supply chain practices and ambiguous language around "eco-friendly materials". This reflects a tension identified in the literature, where aesthetic cues of sustainability can mask incomplete or exaggerated claims (Bandyopadhyay & Ray 2020). The framework highlights the need for clearer evidence and more transparent communication.

7.1.2. Respect for persons and groups

The brand's visual identity features diverse models and references to artisanal craftsmanship. While representation is generally respectful, the use of cultural motifs from marginalised communities raises questions about cultural appropriation and reciprocity. This aligns with concerns raised by Venkatesh and Meamber (2008) regarding the ethical implications of aestheticising cultural difference.

7.1.3. Autonomy and influence

The brand's minimalist aesthetic promotes calmness and intentional consumption, supporting reflective decision-making. However, scarcity-driven marketing (e.g., limited drops) may create pressure and urgency, raising

ethical questions about manipulation. The framework helps identify this contradiction between aesthetic restraint and behavioural nudging.

7.1.4. Justice and inclusion

The brand's identity is visually inclusive but economically exclusive, with high price points limiting accessibility. This reflects broader debates about the social justice implications of sustainable consumption (Holt 2002). The framework draws attention to the gap between inclusive representation and exclusive market positioning.

7.1.5. Care and well-being

The brand promotes positive emotional associations with slow fashion and mindful consumption. Its aesthetic avoids unrealistic body ideals, supporting consumer well-being. This aligns with Leon and Skorin-Kapov's (2023) argument that aesthetic choices can foster healthier organisational and consumer relationships.

7.1.6. Environmental and cultural stewardship

The brand's environmental messaging is strong but inconsistently evidenced. Cultural stewardship is mixed: while craftsmanship is celebrated, the absence of community partnerships raises concerns about extractive storytelling. The framework highlights the need for deeper engagement with cultural origins.

7.1.7. Aesthetic responsibility

The brand's aesthetic coherence reinforces its ethical positioning, but the reliance on "natural" aesthetics risks oversimplifying complex sustainability issues. Semprini's (2005) work on aesthetic meaning-making helps interpret this tension between aesthetic clarity and ethical complexity.

Overall, the case study demonstrates how the framework reveals both strengths and ethical blind spots in sustainable fashion branding.

7.2. Case Study 2: A Digital Technology Brand

Digital technology brands operate in environments where aesthetic design directly shapes user behaviour, making them a critical context for evaluating autonomy, influence, and digital well-being. For this case, the framework is applied to a hypothetical but representative digital technology brand.

7.2.1. Truthfulness and transparency

The brand positions itself as privacy-focused, using clean, minimalist design to signal trustworthiness. However, privacy settings are buried within the interface, creating a disconnect between aesthetic cues and functional transparency. This reflects Frederick's (1999) concerns about deception through design.

7.2.2. Respect for persons and groups

The brand's identity emphasises universality and neutrality, but its imagery predominantly features young, able-bodied users. This raises questions about representational inclusivity, echoing concerns in visual branding research (Schroeder 2006).

7.2.3. Autonomy and influence

The brand employs persuasive interface design to encourage prolonged engagement, including notifications, personalised prompts, and gamified elements. These strategies raise ethical concerns about manipulation and cognitive overload, aligning with broader debates on digital persuasion and autonomy (Frederick, 1999).

7.2.4. Justice and inclusion

The brand's identity promotes accessibility, but its design choices—such as low-contrast text and gesture-based navigation—create barriers for users with visual or motor impairments. The framework highlights the gap between inclusive rhetoric and inaccessible design.

7.2.5. Care and well-being

The brand's aesthetic promotes productivity and efficiency but may contribute to stress and overwork. Leon and Skorin-Kapov (2023) note that aesthetic environments shape emotional states, making this an important ethical consideration.

7.2.6. Environmental and cultural stewardship

The brand's identity rarely engages with environmental or cultural issues, reflecting a narrow conception of responsibility. The framework identifies this as a missed opportunity for stewardship.

7.2.7. Aesthetic responsibility

The brand's sleek, minimalist aesthetic conveys neutrality and objectivity, but this aesthetic can obscure the value-laden nature of technological systems. Semprini's (2005) insights help interpret how aesthetic neutrality can mask ethical complexity.

This case study demonstrates how the framework can be used to interrogate the ethical implications of digital aesthetics and interface design.

7.3. Comparative Insights

Comparing the two cases reveals several cross-cutting insights. Aesthetic coherence does not guarantee ethical coherence; brands may appear ethical while obscuring problematic practices. Representation and inclusion remain persistent challenges across industries. Digital environments raise unique concerns about autonomy and cognitive influence. Cultural and environmental stewardship varies widely depending on sector norms. Aesthetic responsibility is a powerful but under-recognised ethical dimension.

These insights demonstrate the value of the framework in identifying ethical tensions that may not be visible through traditional branding analysis.

7.3.1. Disclaimer

Two illustrative, hypothetical brand profiles were used in section 7 rather than real, named companies. This was intentional so the case studies could demonstrate how the framework works without making unverifiable or potentially inaccurate claims about specific organisations.

A composite sustainable fashion brand was constructed by blending common features found across the sector such as strong sustainability messaging, natural and/or earthy aesthetic cues, references to artisanal craftsmanship, minimalist visual identity, and premium pricing and limited-drop releases.

This type of composite case was used to analyse typical ethical tensions in sustainable fashion without attributing them to a specific company.

A composite digital technology brand was used, representing a privacy-focused, minimalist interface, persuasive design patterns (notifications, prompts, gamification), universalist branding imagery, and accessibility challenges common in tech interfaces. This case study reflects patterns observed in practice on digital persuasion, interface ethics, and tech branding, without naming a specific firm.

Composite cases were used to demonstrate the framework's analytical power, avoid making claims about real companies that cannot be fully verified, highlight recurring ethical tensions across an industry, and keep the focus on the framework rather than on a single brand's idiosyncrasies. Finally, this approach was used to illustrate a new evaluative model instead of redirecting the study focus on evidence found in branding practice.

8. Discussion

The development and application of the ethical brand identity framework highlight the complex interplay between ethics, aesthetics, and organisational communication. The case studies demonstrate that brand identity construction is not merely a strategic or creative exercise but a normative practice with significant implications for stakeholder autonomy, cultural representation, and organisational legitimacy. This section synthesises the insights generated by the framework, discusses its theoretical contributions, and outlines implications for branding practice and future research.

8.1. Ethical tensions revealed through the framework

The case studies illustrate several recurring ethical tensions that cut across industries. One prominent tension concerns the gap between aesthetic coherence and ethical coherence. Brands often employ aesthetic strategies—such as natural imagery, minimalist design, or heritage cues—to signal ethical values, yet these signals may not align with organisational behaviour. This echoes concerns raised in the literature about the use of aestheticised narratives to construct impressions of authenticity or responsibility without substantive ethical commitments (Frederick 1999; Bandyopadhyay & Ray 2020). The framework helps reveal these discrepancies by requiring systematic evaluation of truthfulness, transparency, and stewardship.

A second tension relates to representation and inclusion. Both case studies show that brands may adopt inclusive visual identities while simultaneously reproducing exclusionary practices, whether through cultural appropriation, narrow portrayals of users, or inaccessible design. This aligns with Schroeder's (2006) argument that branding participates in cultural meaning-making and can reinforce social hierarchies. The framework's focus on respect, justice, and inclusion helps identify these representational gaps.

A third tension concerns autonomy and influence, particularly in digital contexts. The technology case demonstrates how persuasive design can undermine user autonomy even when aesthetic cues suggest neutrality or trustworthiness. This reflects broader debates about manipulation, cognitive vulnerability, and the ethics of digital persuasion (Frederick 1999). The framework's emphasis on autonomy and well-being provides a structured way to interrogate these issues.

8.2. Theoretical contributions

The framework contributes to branding scholarship in several ways. First, it integrates ethical theory and aesthetic theory, demonstrating that brand identity construction is both a moral and aesthetic practice. While previous research has examined ethical branding (Syed Alwi, Ali & Nguyen 2017) and the cultural dimensions of visual identity (Schroeder 2006), few studies have systematically combined these perspectives into a unified evaluative model.

Second, the framework advances the concept of aesthetic responsibility, highlighting the moral significance of aesthetic choices. Drawing on Semprini's (2005) work on aesthetic meaning-making and Leon and Skorin-Kapov's (2023) insights into the ethics-aesthetics nexus, the framework positions aesthetics as a site of ethical agency rather than a neutral design concern.

Third, the framework contributes to organisational ethics by conceptualising brand identity as an expression of organisational character. This aligns with virtue-based and care-based approaches to business ethics (Fisher & Lovell 2009), offering a way to evaluate how organisations communicate their values through aesthetic and narrative practices.

8.3. Implications for branding practice

For practitioners, the framework offers a structured tool for assessing and improving ethical brand identity construction. It encourages organisations to ensure alignment between identity and behaviour, adopt inclusive and respectful representational practices, avoid manipulative or coercive design strategies, consider the psychological and cultural effects of aesthetic choices, and engage responsibly with cultural and environmental narratives.

By making ethical considerations explicit, the framework supports more reflective and accountable branding practices. It also provides a basis for internal dialogue among designers, strategists, and leadership teams, helping organisations identify ethical blind spots and areas for improvement.

8.4. Implications for future research

The framework opens several avenues for future research. Empirical studies could apply the framework across different industries to identify sector-specific ethical challenges. Longitudinal research could examine how ethical brand identities evolve over time, particularly in response to social or regulatory pressures. Further work could also explore how consumers interpret ethical and aesthetic cues, building on research into visual culture and consumer meaning-making (Venkatesh & Meamber 2008).

Additionally, the framework could be adapted for use in participatory research, involving stakeholders such as employees, consumers, or community groups in evaluating brand identity practices. This would align with emerging interest in co-creative and relational approaches to branding (Sarasvuo, Rindell, & Kovalchuk 2021).

8.5. Limitations

As with any conceptual framework, there are limitations. The framework relies on interpretive judgement, which may introduce subjectivity. While the criteria and indicators help structure evaluation, different researchers may weigh dimensions differently depending on context. The use of composite case studies, while analytically useful, may not capture the full complexity of real organisational environments. Future research using real brands and triangulated data sources would help strengthen the framework's empirical grounding.

9. Conclusion

The development of a normative framework for ethical brand identity construction demonstrates that branding is not only a strategic or aesthetic activity but a fundamentally ethical practice. Across the paper, the integration of ethical theory, aesthetic analysis, and organisational communication highlights how brand identity shapes stakeholder perceptions, influences behaviour, and participates in broader cultural meaning-making. The seven-dimension framework—encompassing truthfulness, respect, autonomy, justice, care, stewardship, and aesthetic responsibility—provides a structured way to evaluate these ethical dynamics and to identify where branding practices align with or diverge from moral expectations.

The case studies show that ethical tensions frequently arise when aesthetic coherence is mistaken for ethical coherence. Brands may appear responsible through visual cues or narrative strategies while masking gaps in transparency, inclusivity, or stewardship. The framework helps reveal these contradictions by requiring systematic evaluation across multiple dimensions rather than relying on surface-level impressions. It also highlights the importance of representation, accessibility, and the psychological impact of aesthetic choices—areas that are often overlooked in traditional branding analysis.

Theoretically, the framework contributes to branding scholarship by bringing ethics and aesthetics into a unified evaluative model. It advances the concept of aesthetic responsibility and positions brand identity as an expression of organisational character, drawing on virtue-based and care-based ethical perspectives. Practically, the framework offers organisations a tool for assessing and improving their identity practices, encouraging more reflective, transparent, and accountable branding.

There are limitations, including the interpretive nature of ethical evaluation and the need for further empirical validation across diverse industries. Future research could apply the framework to real brands, explore consumer interpretations of ethical identity cues, or examine how ethical brand identities evolve over time.

Overall, the framework provides a foundation for understanding brand identity as a moral practice and offers a pathway for organisations to construct identities that are not only aesthetically compelling but ethically grounded.

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